

16th Sunday B/2009

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“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”

Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall.” Do you remember learning it in the early grades? I had to search for it to remind myself of the whole poem but those lines “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down,” I have never forgotten.

Why walls? Because this is what we hear today. “For Christ is our peace. He made of Jews and Gentiles one people and broke down the dividing wall of enmity through his flesh.” (Probably enmity is too soft a translation. It should be hatred.) Through Christ, enemies—those who are at odds against each other, those who hate each other—are made one, reconciled. The walls that divide persons, religions, cultures, differences that alienate one from the other, are broken down.

Would that it were true! In the history of Christianity, Christ himself has been often been made the dividing wall between Christians and Jews, Christians and Muslims, and even among those who profess his name as Lord and Savior. How can this be? How is it that the one who is our peace, who, as St. Paul says, broke down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles, has been made for centuries into a wall that divides? How is it that Christ has been used as a rationale for division, separation and even hatred?

Some of you may have heard my filling station story. I was having my car filled up at a local gas station a number of years ago before self-service was the norm. I was wearing my clerics and the person who had filled up my car came to give me back my credit card. He asked if I were a Christian which I acknowledged. He said he was Muslim and that Muslims believed that Jesus was a great prophet and then he shouted at me, “But he is not the Son of God.” Startled by his response, I drove away as fast as I could. There in that gas station was the dividing wall of belief, a separation of two human beings who see the world in a different way. It was my most memorable encounter at a gas station.

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall. That wants it down.

If you look at the ministry of Jesus, you see him tearing down all sorts of wall that separate one from another. He is the one who says “love your enemies,” “do good to those who hate you.” He always seems to be breaking down the barriers that wall people out, that the law excludes. He finds himself within the walls of the homes of tax collectors and sinners so that he can break down the walls of isolation and alienation that they know.

Have in you the mind that was in Christ Jesus, although being of divine estate he did not cling to this but emptied himself, and became a slave, taking on our human condition. When we think of Christ’s self-emptying, his death on the cross, the way in which he lived his life with such compassion as we hear in the gospel today, so moved by the human condition of pain and suffering, of people’s isolation from one another, it is hard to believe that Christ himself could possibly want to be the source of division that he has often been made to be. Jesus Christ is all about peace and reconciling all through the blood of the Cross. He didn’t share in the human condition of “some.” He shared our human condition that embraces the suffering and pain of all. Jesus was moved to pity when he saw the crowd gathered because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus possessed this empathic sense of the other, knowing their suffering, their pain, their longing for healing, for wholeness.

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.

The question I ask each of us tonight is this: if we are followers of Jesus, if we are his disciples and he teaches us compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, love instead of hatred, how can we break down the walls in our own lives that keep us alienated, separated from others, the poor, the marginalized, the outcasts in our own sphere of existence? What are the walls of prejudice, of judgment, of hardness of heart that contribute to our own isolation from others? Will we let this Jesus who is our peace help us to break down the walls that divide us?